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ABSTRACT

Service learning involves adolescent students in meaningful work within their community. This study examined the personal and educational motivations and expectations of 140 fifth through seventh graders from one middle school in New York City who were participating in a service learning program using the National Helper Network program model. This model stresses involvement in meaningful work within the community for at least 1 to 2 hours per week, linked with a weekly period of reflection involving preparation and planning, thoughtful discussion, and problem solving. Students completed the Student Service Learning Survey before and after participating in the program. Findings indicated that students ranked both personal and educational benefits of service learning as important. Girls consistently reported higher expectations for service learning than boys. Girls expected more positive personal growth such as learning to care for others, better understand people, and improve their community than did boys. Boys were more motivated by grades and course credit than were girls. Results suggest that the benefits of service learning may be increased with insight into student motivations and beliefs and with adequate preparation of students. (Contains 21 references.) (KB)

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Gender Differences Among Early Adolescents' Motivations and Expectations for Service Learning

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Gender Differences Among Early Adolescents' Motivations and Expectations for Service Learning

Abstract

Service learning involves young adolescents in meaningful work within their community. Data concerning 140 middle school students' personal and educational motivations, and expectations for participating were collected. Students ranked both personal and educational benefits as important. Gender differences indicated girls expect more positive personal growth and boys were more motivated by the grades and course credit. The benefits of service learning may be increased with insight into student motivations and beliefs and with adequate preparation of students.

Gender Differences Among Early Adolescents' Motivations and Expectations for Service Learning

During early adolescence, students are at increased risk for becoming alienated from school (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; National Society for the Study of Education, 1980). They begin to show a marked decline in their grades, decreased confidence in their academic abilities, and less interest in school (Eccles et al., 1993). Some argue that decreases in student motivation are directly linked to school practices which do not maximize the strengths of early adolescents, but rather minimize their capacities (see Anderman & Maehr, 1994).

Service learning has been proposed as one strategy for reconnecting youth to the community, motivating youngsters to learn, providing needed service in urban areas and helping students become active learners (ASLER, 1993; Hedin, 1987; Conrad & Hedin, 1991). According to the Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform (ASLER), service learning is a method by which young people learn through community participation. Service can incorporate a wide range of activities (e.g., child care, tutoring, working with elderly, cleaning a park), and within a given activity, a wide variety of tasks (e.g., preparing materials, interacting with others, cleaning-up). Programs may be integrated into the entire curriculum, included as an elective or add on, or fall somewhere in between (Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, & Price, 1991; McPherson, 1991).

Despite increased interest in and adoption of youth service programs, there have been few comprehensive studies among middle school students. Most studies have focused on older adolescents, high school or college students (e.g., Conrad & Hedin, 1981; Hamilton & Zeldin, 1987; Newmann & Rutter, 1983; Serow, 1991). Yet, early adolescence is a critical period for developing the skills needed for the transition to high school and beyond, as well as for continuing to develop a sense of self.

Between the ages of 11 and 14, young people are experimenting with different roles and identities, struggling between the desire for independence and the need for peer and adult acceptance, and seeking opportunities for meaningful involvement in social activities (Schine, 1989). However, the school environment often does not meet the developmental needs of middle school students. Typically middle schools are characterized by few opportunities for students to make important decisions, poor teacher-student relationships, increased attention to individual talents and abilities, and excessive disciplinary rules (Anderman & Maehr, 1994). Conversely, service learning provides young people with opportunities to engage in meaningful activities, establish positive relationships with peers and adults, and

express caring and empathy in a supportive environment (Harrington, 1992).

The caveat in the appeal for service learning is that its value and perceived usefulness may differ for boys and girls. The purpose of the present study was to explore whether the expectancies for participating in service learning differ between middle school boys and girls.

The Gender of Service Learning

During early adolescence, the roles, relationships, and activities chosen and preferred by boys and girls differ. In fact, by the age of four or five, children not only define themselves on the biological basis of sex but begin to choose gender-appropriate activities and same-sex peers (Bem, 1981). Activities, and entire domains, become associated with masculine or feminine attributes and self-worth is evaluated according to compatible sex-typed choices and behaviors. In "masculine" domains, such as mathematics, girls often perceive themselves as less able than boys, attribute their failures to lack of ability, are less likely to expect success, and subsequently make different choices, e.g., whether or not to take an advanced math class, than boys (Meece & Courtney, 1992; Pintrich, Garcia, & DeGroot, 1994).

Service learning, on the contrary, may be viewed as a "feminine" domain, i.e., one in which culturally defined attributes of femininess, such as caring, are associated. This is likely to depend on the particular program, e.g., whether service learning is promoted as a means for helping the community and others or as an opportunity to develop responsibility and other school-to-work skills. With older adolescents, the research often focuses on how service learning provides opportunities to develop an increased sense of responsibility, learn about careers and become aware of their own abilities (Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, & Price, 1991; Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Hedin & Conrad, 1987; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988; Newmann & Rutter, 1983).

It is not clear if boys and girls hold different values and expectations for participating in service learning. If they do, the impact of participating in service learning may vary as a function of such expectancies. Some research suggests that after participating in service learning girls' attitudes about social responsibility improve more than boys (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988). However, students' motivations before participation were not assessed. The present study examined gender differences in students' perceptions of participating in a Helper program - a particular model of service learning developed for early adolescents.

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The Helper Model of Service Learning

Over the past 14 years, the National Helpers Network has developed a model of service learning. The goals of the Helper Program (Schine, 1990) were advanced in consideration of the developmental needs of early adolescents (Table 1), which as Chine stresses are different than those of older adolescents or college students. This model stresses the involvement of young adolescents in meaningful work within their community (e.g., assisting in a day care center), for at least 1-2 hours per week, linked with a weekly period of reflection, that is, preparation and planning, thoughtful discussion, and problem solving. The Helper model is based on the belief that participation in service learning benefits the community by helping to meet real community needs and benefits young adolescents by providing opportunities for growth and learning not encountered in the traditional school setting (Schine, 1989).

Table 1

Goals of the Helper Program

* Apply knowledge and skills learned in the classroom in the "real world"
* Enhance communication skills
* Provide an opportunity for young people to assume responsibility
* Introduce students to the realities of the world of work and begin to explore career options
* Enhance students' efficacy and self-esteem
* Provide training and experience in problem-solving
* Provide a meaningful and appropriate activity
* Forge new links between school and community
* Instill in early adolescents a sense of community and societal responsibility
* Promote the values of community service

Adapted From: Schine, J (1990). Goals of the Helper Program. National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence.

Method

Participants

The sample for this study included all fifth through seventh grade students from one lower-middle class New York City urban middle school (n = 104). All students in this school participate in the Helper model of service learning. The sample included approximately equal numbers of boys (53%) and girls (47%). The average age of students was 11 years.

Procedure

Before students began service learning, teachers administered the Student Service Learning Survey. The survey includes both Likert-scale and open-ended questions intended to assess students' motivations for participating in service learning, their expectations about the experience, and their attitudes toward school. A pilot version of this survey was field tested with over 400 students and six teachers in five schools.

For the purposes of this paper, we examine responses to questions related to student expectations for service learning. First, students were asked whether they expected service learning to help them in 10 personal growth areas (e.g., being less afraid to try to things). The scale asks, "How true do you think each of the following will be for you?" Students respond on a 4-point scale from 1, not at all true to 4, very true. Second, students were asked whether they expected service learning to help them in educational areas (English/Reading, Math, Science, Social Studies/History, Art/Music and Foreign Language). Students respond on a 3-point scale from 1, will help a lot to 3, will not help. Third, students ranked six reasons why they would want to participate in service learning: to make new friends, to make the community better, because their friends are doing it, for a grade or credit, to feel good, and to get career experience. The six choices were selected after a literature review, and student and teacher interviews. They reflect both personal and educational motivations for participating. Although the focus of this work is on the expectations students bring with them to service learning, we present some data concerning post-service beliefs.

Data Analyses and Results

Student responses were examined using descriptive statistics, analyses of variance and analysis of covariance. Overall, the results suggest that girls expect more from service learning in the personal growth areas than boys. Gender differences were not evident in the educational areas.

Table 2 presents the pre and post mean responses of boys and girls to the 10 expectations for personal growth areas. Although the differences between boys and girls are small, girls consistently reported higher expectations for service learning than boys. Specifically, based upon separate analyses of variance, girls expected to learn to care for others, better

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Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations to Expectation Statements by Gender

	Pre-Service		Post-Service	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Learn to care for others	3.34 (.80)	3.70* (.51)	3.05 (.80)	3.67* (.54)
Feel good about self	3.14 (.97)	3.48 (.73)	3.11 (.92)	3.47 (.74)
Make new friends	3.12 (1.02)	3.39 (.81)	2.76 (.94)	3.53* (.74)
Be less afraid to try new things	3.00 (1.10)	3.00 (.94)	2.95 (.82)	3.00 (.94)
Better understand people	2.92 (1.00)	3.32* (.71)	2.45 (.77)	3.25 (.69)
Think about world differently	2.85 (1.05)	3.25 (.89)	3.05 (.97)	3.11 (.85)
Be more prepared for real world	2.82 (.94)	3.11 (.99)	2.71 (.84)	3.31* (.89)
Know how to improve community	2.80 (1.05)	3.30* (.90)	2.76 (.91)	3.03 (.81)
Learn about myself	2.76 (1.12)	2.80 (1.09)	2.45 (1.10)	2.81 (.89)
Like school more	2.43 (1.17)	2.84 (1.10)	2.16 (1.22)	2.67 (1.17)

* $p < .01$

Note. Gender differences at pre-testing were examined with ANOVA; post-scores were examined using ANCOVA, using pre-scores as covariates.

understand people, and improve their community more than boys. Interestingly, although girls had higher means on each statement, the order of the statements were similar for boys and girls. The means presented in Table 2 are listed in descending order beginning with the highest pre-score mean for boys. The ordering of means show that both boys and girls expected service learning to help them learn to care for others, better understand people, and improve their community.

To test for gender differences on the post surveys, analyses of covariances were performed, using pre-survey responses as covariates. Statistically significant differences were found on three of the 10 statements. Girls were more likely to report that after service learning they made new friends, learned to care for others, and became more prepared for the real world. Neither boys or girls expected service learning to help them like school more, at either pre or post-testing.

Another indication of student expectations for service learning was obtained by asking students to rank (from most to least important) six reasons why they would participate in service learning (see Table 3). The two most important reasons for participating in service learning that girls reported were to feel good about themselves (55%) and to make new friends (52%). The most important reasons boys gave are to make new friends (46%), to feel good about themselves (40%) and for a course grade (40%). Interestingly, girls are less likely to participate for a course grade (52%). Both boys and girls reported they were least likely to participate in service learning because their friends are doing it (67% for boys, 82% for girls).

Table 3

Student Rankings of the Most and Least Important Reasons to Participate in Service Learning

	Most Important		Least Important	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
To make new friends	46%	52%	17%	15%
Make community better	27%	30%	27%	21%
Friends are doing it	7%	3%	67%	82%
For course grade	40%	18%	27%	52%
Makes me feel good	40%	55%	27%	15%
Get career experience	37%	42%	30%	15%

Note. Most important - ranked 1 or 2; least - ranked 5 or 6.

Table 4 presents the students' expectations for service learning in six educational areas. Statistically significant differences were not found between boys and girls in any of the subject areas at either pre or post-testing.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Educational Expectations by Gender

	Pre-Service		Post-Service	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
English	2.07 (.70)	2.13 (.70)	2.67 (.65)	2.40 (.81)
Mathematics	2.19 (.90)	2.42 (.72)	2.88 (.40)	2.68 (.61)
Science	2.34 (.73)	2.40 (.63)	2.80 (.47)	2.79 (.56)
History	2.15 (.83)	2.26 (.59)	2.79 (.48)	2.67 (.62)
Language	2.30 (.82)	2.31 (.69)	2.69 (.54)	2.64 (.68)
Art	2.02 (.77)	2.05 (.79)	2.59 (.66)	2.30 (.79)

Note. Scale range was 1 to 3, with high scores indicating service learning "will not help" in subject areas.

Discussion

Service learning is one strategy for motivating young people to learn and for providing needed services in urban communities. The results of the present study suggest boys and girls begin service learning with somewhat different expectations. Girls more strongly expected that service learning would provide greater opportunities for personal growth than boys. While boys also believed service learning would help them in personal growth areas, they were more likely to report participating for extrinsic reasons, such as a course grade. Gender differences were not found in students' expectations concerning the educational benefits of service learning; neither boys nor girls

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felt that service learning would help them in traditional academic subjects.

The study of expectations is important because, as has been demonstrated in subject areas such as mathematics, the beliefs which students bring to the learning context have an impact on how students learn. If boys and girls begin service learning with different expectations, as shown in this study, then the impact of the experience may also differ. Work is now underway which examines gender differences in impact and its relationship to expectations.

There is also a need to look at the relationship between impact and gender as a function of the service learning program. Program characteristics such as its goals, the people involved in organizing and "selling" the program to students, and the service experience itself, i.e., service activities, set the tone for how the experience is interpreted by students. At the school which participated in the present study, the goal of their service program was to "promote caring: caring for others and caring for ideas" (quoted from principal of school sampled in this study). One speculation is that observed gender differences are a reflection of program characteristics, including program goals and how service learning is introduced to students. From our perspective, student orientation toward service learning is a critical aspect of how students come to perceive the value of service learning and feel a part of the service experience.

Although the focus of this work was to study gender differences among expectations, rather than pre-post differences, examination of the data suggest that the means decrease at post-testing. As part of a three year study of five Helper programs we will examine the impact of service learning and its relationship to program characteristics, including student orientation.

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